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Cage-free eggs rolling off the farms

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Jerry Knapke of Fort Recovery Equity, Inc. shows nest boxes inside a new open cage chicken facility in Fort Recovery, Oh., Friday, Sept. 21, 2007. The nest boxes are covered by red plastic flaps to give them a dark area that encourages egg-laying. Knapke doesn't expect cage-free to ever make up the majority of egg production. However, he projects that 5 percent of the 6.5 million birds raised by the company's 60 contract farms will be cage-free within the next six months. (AP Photo/Skip Peterson)

By James Hannah, Associated Press Writer

FORT RECOVERY, Ohio — The 13,000 hens roam the barn floor, spread their wings and duck into nest boxes covered by red plastic flaps to provide a dark area that encourages egg-laying.

Three months earlier, the same barn housed nearly four times as many chickens, but they were confined to small wire cages stacked on top of each other.

Egg farms are increasing their production of cage-free eggs, spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to convert barns by tearing out cages, installing new floors, reconfiguring feed and water lines, and changing ventilation systems.

"It's a growing market," said Jerry Knapke, operations manager for Fort Recovery Equity, the nation's ninth-largest egg producer. "We see a slow, steady growth."

Knapke doesn't expect cage-free to ever make up the majority of eggs produced in the U.S. However, he projects that 5 percent of the 6.5 million birds raised by the company's 60 contract farms will be cage-free within the next six months.

United Egg Producers estimates that 5 percent of U.S. egg production is either cage-free or organic, up from 2 percent three years ago. Organic eggs are produced by cage-free chickens that have access to the outdoors and are fed only organic feed.

Burger King began asking its suppliers for cage-free eggs in March and hopes they account for at least 2 percent of the restaurant chain's egg volume by the end of the year. The Hardee's and Carl's Jr. fast-food chains said in September they would begin buying cage-free eggs and planned to have them account for 2 percent of their egg purchases by July.

The companies say the move is intended to promote better animal welfare.

Paul Shapiro, senior director of the Humane Society of the United States' factory farming campaign, said cages severely restrict chickens' natural needs, preventing them from spreading their wings, nesting and perching, while limiting their ability to walk.

Producing cage-free eggs is profitable but more expensive and labor intensive. Converting a barn to cage-free costs from \$12 to \$22 per hen. A new building can cost up to \$30 per bird.

The higher costs are passed on to consumers.

A dozen large Grade A caged eggs sold for an average of \$1.18, according to a recent survey of 17,000 retailers conducted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. That compared with \$2.58 for cage-free eggs and \$3.53 for organic eggs.

Some egg producers are reluctant to make the transition to a cage-free operation.

While keeping hens in cages does restrict their movement and natural behavior, a well-run operation is clean and efficient, said Joy Mench, a University of California, Davis, professor of animal science who helped write the industry's animal-welfare guidelines.

Food, water and medicine are easily administered, and waste drops through the cage floor. Caged chickens are also less likely to engage in cannibalism or to break bones -- a common problem for hens that divert so much calcium into making eggshells that they develop osteoporosis, Mench said.

Gene Gregory, president of United Egg Producers, said some retailers say they've been intimidated by animal-rights activists, who stage demonstrations, take out full-page newspaper ads and pressure the companies to buy cage-free eggs.

In California, animal-welfare groups are collecting signatures to put an initiative on the November 2008 ballot that would require farmers to house most egg-laying hens in enclosures large enough for them to spread their wings.

Gary West, whose family-owned operation raises 1.5 million laying hens near Modesto, Calif., said such a requirement would double the price of eggs and rob consumers of their right to make their own grocery-purchasing decisions.

"The modern cage-production systems used by most farmers today are considered humane and ethical by leading independent scientific experts on animal welfare and behavior," said West, incoming chairman of United Egg Producers.

For some producers, going cage-free is a throwback to the days when chickens roamed freely around the barnyard.

"Most of the guys -- once they get into this -- they find that they really like it because it kind of brings them back to nature," Knapke said.

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